Against the Grain

Volume 28 | Issue 1 Article 38

2016

Curating Collective Collections--Shared Print and the Book as Artifact

Mike Garabedian
Whittier College, mgarabed@whittier.edu

Bob Kieft
University of Alabama Libraries, rhkrdgzin@gmail.com

Curating Collective Collections — Shared Print and the Book as Artifact

by **Mike Garabedian** (Collections Management Librarian, Whittier College) <mgarabed@whittier.edu>

Column Editor: **Bob Kieft** (688 Holly Ave., Unit 4, St. Paul, MN 55104) <rhkrdgzin@gmail.com>

Editor's Note: *In my November column, I featured a guest piece by* ***Andrew Stauffer****, which took up a thread of concern many bring to the discussion of shared print collections, that of the physicality of the volumes being shared and the circumstances under which a given volume can be said to be identical to another.* ***Curating Collective Collections*** *has pursued this thread since my November 2014 column,* ***"What Exactly Are We Retaining When We Retain That Book,"*** *following up that article in February 2015 with* ***"Silvaculture in the Stacks; or, Lessons from Another Conservation Movement"*** *by* ***Jacob Nadal****, in which* ***Jake*** *uses a forest conservation metaphor to help librarians frame the issues. As promised in November, here is a piece by* ***Mike Garabedian****, a colleague from my Southern California days, that takes up the argument for considering the physicality of books from an angle different from* ***Andy's*** *— that is, the proximity of the volume to its as-published state and the role that state plays in teaching. In this column,* ***Mike*** *makes his case and in a succeeding column will describe a condition survey he conducted to gather evidence in the stacks about the condition of volumes as he defines it here. — **BK***

The Problem of Condition

Despite a fair amount of ink spilled and pixels illuminated about the virtues of shared print networks in our post-print age, writers have paid little attention to the potential *artifactual value* of the copies retained, or what it might mean to deaccession duplicates based on criteria other than condition. Indeed, beyond suggesting that a simple "yes/no" condition validation is a desirable step in inter-collection analysis, no writers have argued that condition should be any kind of criterion when we consider which copies we should retain and which we should deselect to create shared print collections.[1] This elision is problematic. It's probably not controversial to suggest that, because one of the goals of shared print is to allow consortia to deaccession, so the retained copies should be in good shape: If coffee stain-free text blocks and unhighlighted pages are too much to hope for, still most practitioners should agree that at a minimum books with still-attached bindings and no missing pages ought to be standards to which we aspire. What is perhaps a less uncontroversial, even *novel* idea is asking us to consider a more expansive definition of condition, where retained copies would be the most artifactually valuable and therefore most artifactually complete of the duplicate copies of titles member libraries hold in common.

Of course, even shared print proponents who agree that a best-case scenario would have consortia identify and retain only the best copies for sharing are quick to point out that there are significant obstacles to using book conditions as a criterion for retention and deselection.[2] Given multiple copies of a title in multiple libraries, we can almost never determine from catalog records the condition duplicate copies are in. In fact, when it comes to assessing and noting condition, general collections librarians have few tools to work with and a limited, non-standard vocabulary to describe these attributes. Beyond the simple kind of yes/no validation I mentioned above, developing the tools to assess and record book conditions (to say nothing of deploying such tools) will be, in the minds of many practitioners, too time-consuming and too costly for most purposes.

But how time-consuming? And how costly? In summer 2014, I sought to answer these and other questions by testing the feasibility of a condition analysis that would identify copies to retain for a shared print collection.[3] I will address this project and its outcomes fully in a future column. For now, I want to make a case for condition, and consider briefly how our new information ecology — and specifically shared print — might facilitate the selection and preservation of the most artifactually significant books in our collections.

Condition Defined

Because it informs my assertion that best copies should be the most artifactually valuable duplicates, I want to be clear about what I mean by *condition.* For the purposes of shared print agreements, again, it's probably not controversial to suggest that libraries identify severely damaged books, excluding from consideration those duplicates whose poor conditions might mean they would have to be conserved before circulating again. For this reason, many libraries that participate in shared print collections have developed procedures for rejecting copies in really bad shape, and indeed, this is what practitioners who work in general collections think of when they consider *condition.* But it's as important to ensure the copies we select for sharing are the most artifactually valuable and complete copies we can identify, where a "best copy" means a duplicate title whose physical form is closest to the book in its original state. So, for example, given three copies of a mutually held title where one copy has been rebound in library buckram, one is still in its original publisher's binding, and one is still in its original publisher's binding with its original dust-jacket, the best copy would be copy #3.[4] Artifactually speaking, then, it is important to note that not all duplicates are the same.

We librarians who work in general collections are not used to thinking about books like this. Traditionally, the physical or artifactual value of books is something to which our Special Collections colleagues attend. As former **University of Pennsylvania** Curator of Research Services **Daniel Traister** has written, "the root of the sense of the difference between general and special collections" has to do with preservation versus access: Whereas in circulating collections access and the intellectual content of books is emphasized, in special collections preservation and artifactual value take precedence.[5] And indeed, to the extent we consider condition in general collections, it's not to preserve the objects in which intellectual content is embedded but simply to ensure these objects last longer, even if this means destroying parts of the originals (e.g., rebinding books in buckram boards), or using surrogates (e.g., microfilm or digital facsimiles). In the preservation/access binary practitioners like **Traister** have posited, then, we general collections librarians come down firmly on the side of access: For us a book's intellectual content (sometimes called *intrinsic value*) trumps its format or artifactual value, which is why there's such a thing as library binding in the first place.

Content and Artifact

This makes sense: For most readers at most college and research libraries most of the time, an approach to the preservation and storage of books that safeguards access to their intellectual content, not their artifactual integrity, is sufficient. But not always. And in a post-print age that produces increasingly digital texts at the same time many colleges insist their undergraduates conduct original research with primary documents, perhaps increasingly it's not. Twenty years ago, well before the digital revolution but at a time when the business of microfilming brittle books was booming and "the systematic transference of printed and manuscript texts of all periods to electronic form" burgeoning, the **Modern Language Association** called for prudence and provided one rationale as to why it might be worthwhile to expend the resources to identify those book-copies closest to their original state:

> **MLA** believes that it is crucial for the future of humanistic study to make more widely understood the continuing value of the artifacts themselves for reading

continued on page 74

> and research. The advantages of the new forms in which old texts can now be made available must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the new forms cannot fully substitute for the actual physical objects in which those earlier texts were embodied at particular times in the past. ...Texts are inevitably affected by the physical means of their transmission; the physical features of the artifacts conveying texts therefore play an integral role in the attempt to comprehend those texts. For this reason, the concept of a textual source must involve attention to the presentation of a text, not simply to the text as a disembodied group of words.[6]

Just six years later, in their 2001 report *The Evidence in Hand,* the Council on Library and Information Resources' Task Force on the Artifact in Library Collections reasoned similarly, noting "a number of critical research functions will continue to depend on access to the original"; and fairly insisting "that scholars work with librarians to identify and define categories of materials and locate the finest and best-preserved specimens" especially of "categories of printed materials that exist in abundance and do not have high market or exhibition value" — e.g., many of the mutually-held twentieth century books in our general collections.[7]

I want to suggest that libraries can and should acknowledge the importance of original artifacts, recognize the value of the books in their general collections beyond their intellectual content, and develop thoughtful and rational preservation-centered strategies for the large-scale withdrawal of books likely to obtain in the wake of a shared print agreement. To this end, adopting an artifact-focused view of preservation allied more closely with special, not general collections is desirable. For if one of the goals of shared print is to allow participating libraries to deaccession duplicate copies in order to free up space, then in a real sense when we deselect we're creating scarcity where none existed before. In other words, whether shared copies will exist in a storage facility or not, in essence any shared print collection will constitute a new kind of special collection whose originals will have to be all things to future researchers, including researchers interested in books as primary documents and artifacts — again, a constituency that no longer comprises only advanced scholars in the humanities.

In short, leaving aside the well-known economic and space-saving advantages participant libraries are likely to gain upon entering into a shared print agreement, there is yet another, unaddressed potential benefit to shared print: the opportunity "to make more widely understood" the artifactual value of our duplicate holdings by isolating and retaining only the most artifactually complete, "finest and best-preserved" copies of a mutually held title. In so doing we might define a new proposition for printed books in general collections that continues to value intellectual content at the same time it recognizes the special importance of these traditionally-formatted texts as physical artifacts and primary sources.

Indeed, in many cases, candidates for shared print deselection *are* primary sources. Judicious deselection would allow practitioners to do the important work of attending to the artifactual value of these materials, connecting researchers to the contexts in which these books were produced via the physical objects in which they are embedded — an important quality seasoned researchers know well but which is also wholly consistent with the emphasis on information literacy and original research that an increasing number of four-year colleges are insisting upon. Finally, future cooperative collection development within a sharing network could allow us to fill in gaps in our current, general collections with inexpensive, primary resources which student researchers will be able to think about, understand, and value in ways previously associated only with special collections books. By leveraging new, shared print networks to shift little or unused books to locations off-campus, we'll have made sure we have done right by preserving original records and supporting research and knowledge production while only sacrificing immediate access to our patrons.

Into the Woods

In the February 2015 installment of this column, **Jacob Nadal** brought a forestry metaphor to bear upon the curation of shared print collections, suggesting, as he has written elsewhere, that "in thinking about collection management … [it is] informative to look to frameworks used in sustainable forestry and environmental stewardship."[8] Among other things, sustainable forestry involves cutting down trees in the same way that collection management involves weeding and deselection. But **Nadal** also cautions us to take care — "as useful as these frameworks can be … using them also invites in some metaphors that have to be handled with care in the literary realm."[9] Book copies — even duplicate, mutually-held titles — are not as alike as most trees; in deselecting two-thirds of fifteen Giant Sequoias, for example, we would probably want to make sure that the **General Sherman** and **General Grant** would be among the five we didn't cut down. Fortunately for forest rangers, there are signs in front of the **Grant** and **Sherman** trees. Our most artifactually-complete holdings have no such signs. I hope to show in my next column that identifying these items is neither unworkable nor prohibitively expensive, particularly if one employs undergraduate student workers out in the forests of our stacks.

Endnotes

1. See for example **Cyd Dyer**, **Teri Koch**, and **Pam Rees**, "Good Things Come in Small Packages: Getting the Most From Shared Print Retention & Cooperative Collection Development with a Small Group of Libraries" (*https://ci-cci.org/files/2014/06/Charleston2014FINAL.pdf*), where monographs validated for the CI-CCI project are either in "poor" condition or not; or "A Summary of the proposed Northeast Regional Library Shared Print Management Program as of May 2014" (*https://www.blc.org/sites/default/files/BLC_Uploads/Northeast%20Regional%20Library%20Shared%20Print%20Management%20Program%20--%20%20Summary%20%20%20May%202014.pdf*) where validating for condition is not required, but speculation about "procedures to add validation and condition information" is concerned only with books that are "damaged" (versus those that are not).

2. Considering the prospect of using condition as a criterion for selection in 2012, for instance, then-**Holy Names University** Librarian **Karen Schneider** wrote, "I agree with 'best copy' and am thinking that we have at best very limited tools for this (versus online bookselling, where noting condition of copies is routine)." **Schneider, Karen**. "Re: **Occidental College** library and print collections." Message to the author and mscelc listserv subscribers. 8 Oct. 2012. Email.

3. For my pilot project I defined the physical attributes condition validation would include, developed the procedures by which condition would be assessed and recorded, and then put these procedures into practice by assessing the condition of mutually-held copies at eight member libraries within SCELC (the Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium).

4. In lieu of descriptive bibliographical information, such evidence might be derived based upon comparisons between duplicate copies of mutually held titles.

5. **Daniel Traister**, "Is There a Future for Special Collections Librarianship? And Should There Be?" (*RBM* 1.1, 2000, 61).

6. **Modern Language Association**, "Statement on the Significance of Primary Records," *Profession 95* (New York: MLA, 1995, 27-50).

7. Council on Library and Information Resources, *The Evidence in Hand: Report of the Task Force on the Artifact in Library Collections* (Washington, D.C: CLIR, 2001, vi, 29-30). In recent years librarians and bibliographers including **Robert Bee**, **Michelle Cloonan**, and **G. Thomas Tanselle** — as well as bibliophiles like **Nicholson Baker** and **Nicholas Basbanes** — have repeated calls made in the CLIR document, challenging the general collections prioritization of access at the expense of original objects. In a slightly different vein **University of Virginia** Professor and *Book Traces* Web project creator **Andrew Stauffer** has suggested we run the risk of discarding "a massive, distributed archive of the history of reading within our general, circulating collections" by presuming duplicate copies of late 19th century and early 20th century books are identical, interchangeable, and therefore equally discardable, because "Marginalia, inscriptions, photos, original manuscripts, letters, drawings, and many other unique pieces of historical data can be found in individual copies." From "About." *Book Traces*. *http://www.booktraces.org/* Accessed 2 Oct. 2015.

8. **Jacob Nadal**, "Silvaculture in the Stacks, or Lessons from Another Conservation Movement," ***Against the Grain*** (27.1, 2015, 70).

9. **Nadal** 71.